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ABSTRACT

School accountability options are briefly discussed in this executive summary of the document, "Accountability: Implications for State and Local Policymakers," by Michael W. Kirst. Six accountability policies are examined, which include performance reporting, monitoring and compliance, incentive systems, reliance on the market, changing the locus of school control, and changing professional roles. A combination of policies adapted to state and local goals is recommended for maximum effectiveness. Policymakers must also be aware of policy-related issues, such as fit between data systems and performance indicators, local policy model experimentation, innovative incentive systems, authority for decision making, and ineffectiveness of the market accountability approach. (LMI)

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Executive Summary

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Accountability Options: Most Effective When Combined

As the public continues to demand that schools be held accountable for how well they educate their students, policymakers are being called upon to decide which types of accountability systems to implement.

In *Accountability: Implications for State and Local Policymakers*, a paper commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), author Michael W. Kirst of Stanford University examines six accountability options. He argues that they are most effective when used in a combination adapted to local and State goals.

The concept of school accountability is not new. For more than a century, schools have been held responsible for how much students learn. In mid-nineteenth century England, for example, students were given a standard exam; their schools were then paid according to exam scores. This practice sparked immediate debate when English administrators dropped geography and history in order to spend more time on the 3 R's—subjects on which the students were tested. Today, accountability policies fall generally into six broad categories: performance reporting; monitoring and compliance; incentive systems; reliance on the market; changing the locus of authority or control of schools; and changing professional roles.

Performance Reporting

The *performance reporting* approach, similar to the audit report of a business, uses techniques such as statewide assessments, school report cards, or performance indicators to measure a school's success. This approach can be used to spur individuals or groups into action to improve education. A negative assessment report, for example, may convince an aroused parent group to lobby the school board for a new principal.

Ideally, techniques that assess performance should:

- measure what is actually taught;
- provide information that is policy relevant;

- focus on the school, rather than the district;
- encourage fair comparisons; and
- provide a maximum amount of information with a minimum reporting burden to schools.

Monitoring and Compliance

The *monitoring and compliance* approach to accountability addresses a school's compliance with standards or regulations. The key accountability criterion concerns *procedural* compliance, such as individualized education plans for handicapped children and targeting funds under Chapter I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act programs. It includes such legal issues as the due process rights of handicapped students and auditing approaches, such as budget reviews. This strategy is most useful as an accountability tool when it is combined with other strategies that measure what students learn.

Incentive Systems

The *incentive system* approach uses such incentives as merit schools, performance-based accreditation, and teacher merit pay. These systems, however, have been plagued with technical problems and resisted by educators. Merit pay, especially, has run into trouble. One reason is that, while schools seem able to identify incompetent teachers, they appear unable to sort out the top 10 or 20 percent who perform exceptionally well. As a result, attention has shifted to the school site as the unit for performance measurement, avoiding competition among teachers. However, developing assessments considered fair by everyone involved is still a problem.

Reliance on the Market

Accountability through *reliance on the market* depends on consumers to choose among schools, with the less successful schools presumably "run out of business." This approach runs the gamut from vouchers or tuition tax credits to the more limited strategy of open enrollment. However, free market systems have not been fully tested in the United States because of various obstacles, in-

cluding political resistance and concerns about equity.

Where choice remains a prominent issue in many areas, analysts caution it is neither a panacea nor a low-cost school improvement. Choice programs must offer diversity and quality, be well planned, and carefully implemented. They must include procedures to ensure racial balance and to promote racial integration.

Changing the Locus of Control

Some strategies for making schools more accountable would change the *locus of authority or control*. This relies on creating parent advisory councils, implementing school-site decentralization or community-controlled schools, or initiating State takeovers of local school districts. Radical decentralization—Chicago is an example of parents controlling school policy; while in Rochester, New York, the teachers' contract provides for their participation in school-site councils with membership parity.

In the past, the public has depended on local school boards to hold schools accountable. Although many citizens are losing confidence in school boards, they still prefer that they, rather than the State or Federal governments, retain control of the schools.

Changing Professional Roles

The final concept examined by the author is *changing professional roles*. The emphasis here is on professional accountability mechanisms, such as peer review for tenure or dismissal and teacher-controlled boards for initial licensing. For this approach to work, policymakers must trust teachers to provide sufficient accountability and allow enough flexibility in classroom practice for professional discretion to be exercised.

The Policymaker's Role

All six accountability concepts have their strengths and weaknesses, and each is more or less appropriate for certain types of educational interventions and contexts. At the same time, the six categories are not mutually exclusive and should be combined in creative and effective ways. Besides recognizing the need to combine accountability strategies, policymakers must be aware of a number of other policy issues involving accountability.

1. Data systems and performance indicators have improved substantially, providing an array of potential input, process, and outcome variables useful for accountability. However, the problem remains of how to develop and fund a data base that adequately covers the full range of educational endeavor.

There is also a need to scrutinize the assessment tests used in local school districts to determine whether they overemphasize minimum competency and low-level general skills at the expense of higher level skills such as analysis, synthesis, inference, and expository writing.

2. Many policymakers are rethinking their heavy reliance on legal and bureaucratic accountability. While regulations remain important and are essential for certain programs, it is important to allow several models of practice to develop within categorical programs and to let local practitioners experiment to see which one works best in a local context.
3. The incentive system approach that uses incentive pay to promote better input-output relationships remains questionable. Merit pay seems to have lost whatever slight political momentum it had in the early 1980s, and merit schools are spreading very slowly through the States. Incentive systems that are part of the normal school budget process also are not gaining ground and the approach needs more experimentation.
4. A major issue is the debate over who should make the decisions regarding the best way to get educational results: politicians and parents, or educators. Decentralization is a popular outgrowth of this debate, especially when combined with restructuring, professionalism, and community control. Educators also are examining industrial restructuring concepts that allow school-site employees to make more of the decisions.
5. Many questions remain about the market accountability approach (vouchers, choice, etc.) which is focused more on public than private schools. As open enrollment within and between public school districts becomes more available, it is not clear if—or why—students will use it. For example will parents choose a school because it is close to their workplace or because it is a good school? Will parents' knowledge that they have a choice be an important accountability technique? And will those schools that lose pupils improve their educational performance or continue to deteriorate?

For information about ordering a copy of the full report, *Accountability: Implications for State and Local Policymakers* (Publication Number IS 90-982), contact OERI, Education Information Branch, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20208-5641. Please include the publication number with your request.

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